**Presbyterian Large Church Conference**

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**Presentation #1**

# NOT LEAVING CHURCH: Do We Have a Future?

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**One of the best and most talked about books of the year, at least in circles where you and I live and move and have our being, is Barbara Brown Taylor's *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith*. I suspect most of us read it with high interest. Barbara Brown Taylor has been our mentor. She writes so elegantly. She speaks even more elegantly. She is bright, sophisticated, unapologetically human. Most of us have quoted her, borrowed liberally from her books — with appropriate attribution, of course. She speaks and lectures at every important conference in the land. If it is appropriate to use the term "successful" in the same sentence as "ministry," Barbara Brown Taylor has been very successful. What happened? Why in the world did she leave and write a book about it with a picture on the book jacket of a white dove flying out of a bird cage with the door wide open?**

**I suppose we've all thought about it at one time or another — life outside. And I suspect, given who the people are who attend conferences like this one, successful (there that word is again!), confident, capable — which is to say marketable in the world outside church — I suspect each of us, in one way or another, thought about decided not to leave, to stay with it, to finish the race.**

**Now, to be honest about it, Barbara Brown Taylor didn't really leave. My guess is that her ministry will continue to be effective for many years as she teaches, writes, lectures and preaches — as she will at Fourth Presbyterian Church next month, and as she did as the *Christian Century* lecturer two years ago.**

**In her book — she briefly mentions her success as the Pastor of Grace Calvary Church in the Northern Georgia mountains. And she chronicles the gap between the outer life of ministry and the inner life of her own soul (see Diane Butler Bass in *Congregations*, Fall 2006).**

**"It is difficult to say what went wrong between the church and me" she writes, and never provides a simple answer. Some readers thought it was a cop-**

**out: that given her successes on the lecture, guest-preacher circuit, she not only has an advantage most modestly compensated laborers in the vineyard do not, but also — she owes us more explanation.**

**I loved the book. I think seminaries ought to make it required reading. I appreciated the candor — the warning that this vocation of ours can burn us out, exhaust our souls and leave us, at the end of the day, utterly, forlornly, empty.**

**And, on the subject of the church, I underlined this: "We may be in for a long wait before the Holy Spirit shows us a new way to be the church together."**

**And I decided to begin our sojourn together on the topic of *Not Leaving Church: Do We Have a Future?***

**When Glenn Doak called and invited me to come to Orlando and make four presentations to a group of fellow Presbyterian pastors, my first response was "Goodness! I don't know enough about anything to make four presentations, unless it might be Major League baseball, and the long, tragic wilderness wandering of the Chicago Cubs, and the fact that they**

**are, even as I speak, on the mountaintop, peering into the promised land: "What do you want me to talk about, Glenn?" I asked and hastily scribbled down his suggestions:**

**How do you do what you do?**

**How do you manage your staff?**

**How do you interact with the musicians?**

**How do you do pastoral care in a large church setting?**

**How do you manage Fourth Presbyterian Church and *The Christian Century*?**

**Do you do anything that is unique?**

**I will get to all of that later. I don't think I am being unduly modest, but I'm not sure, in regard to the last question, that I am doing anything so unique that you would spend your continuing education budget to hear me — unless of course the place had other compensations — say, Orlando, Florida in January.**

**In any event my hope is that you will think with me about the Church: and about our vocation as an expression of Stewardship and about the enormously important reality of religious pluralism and being**

**faithful Christians and preachers in this amazing new and diverse world: and finally — about how to stay alive and well without, as Eileen Lindner says, without catching your robe on fire.**

**Elaine Pagels is a distinguished professor at Princeton University. She is not a seminary professor. She is a humanities scholar who studies and knows a lot about the human phenomenon of religion. Her specialty is early Christianity, and she is widely respected for her scholarly research and books. She is not particularly a church person. In fact, she had pretty much given up on the church as an institution worthy of her time and attention, not unlike a lot of thoughtful people.**

**But she begins her book, *Beyond Belief,* with an unusual—for her— anecdote and a very powerful witness.**

**On a bright, cold Sunday morning in New York, she interrupted her daily run by stopping in the vestibule of an Episcopal church to get warm. Two days earlier, her two-and-a-half-year-old son had been diagnosed with an invariably fatal lung disease. I**

**cannot even begin to imagine how devastating that experience must be. She writes:**

> **Since I had not been in church for a long time, I was startled by my response to the worship in progress—the soaring harmonies of the choir singing with the congregation; and the priest, a woman in bright gold and white vestments, proclaiming the prayers in a clear resonant voice. As I stood watching, a thought came to me: Here is a family that knows how to face death. . . .**
>
> **The day after we heard Mark's diagnosis—and that he had a few months to live, maybe a few years—a team of doctors urged us to authorize a lung biopsy, a painful and invasive procedure. How could this help? It couldn't, they explained; but the procedure would let them see how far the disease had progressed. Mark was already exhausted by the previous day's ordeal. Holding him, I felt that if more masked strangers poked needles into him in an operating room, he might lose heart—literally—and die. We refused the biopsy, gathered Mark's blanket, clothes, and Peter Rabbit, and carried him home.**

> **Standing in the back of that church, I recognized, uncomfortably, that I needed to be there. Here was a place to weep without imposing tears upon a child; and here was a heterogeneous community that had gathered to sing, to celebrate, to acknowledge common needs, and to deal with what we cannot control or imagine (pp. 3–4).**

**It's more common these days to criticize the church than to celebrate it. It's the easiest target in the world, the church is. It always has been. Among institutions, none has higher aspirations or a more ambitious mission statement, and none, consequently, misses the mark by a wider margin than the church.**

**It is so easy to criticize the church, dismiss the church as irrelevant. Sociologists are telling us that modern — or postmodern religion is and will be an individual matter, not institutional. One of the most important of these sociologists of religion, Wade Clark Roof, calls the United States, A Nation of Seekers, not joiners. "Spirituality" is the rage, a privatized quest for God, meaning, happiness, or at least good feelings — which has less and less to do with religion as we know it, particularly institutional religion. "I'm a spiritual person," Americans are inclined to say. "But**

**I’m not religious.” Which means: “I read books on spirituality, write in a journal about my spiritual journey, practice deep breathing, yoga, and meditation before breakfast, and watch Oprah Winfrey, who talks about spirituality a lot — but I don’t go to church.”**

**People who do go to church, who express their spirituality institutionally, people who know the church intimately and attend worship, volunteer, study, serve as officers in times of controversy and challenge and conflict when the church is not very pretty and not much fun, people who know the church intimately, have a lover’s quarrel with it.**

**Author Annie Dillard—in an essay on the New Testament in a book of essays by prominent authors, *Incarnation* — "The Ascension:"**

> **"What a pity, that so hard on the heels of Christ come the Christians (the church). Who can believe in them?" (*Incarnation, Contemporary Writers on the New Testament*, p.36, Edited by Alfred Corn).**

**The English poet Southey:**

> **"I could believe in Christ if he did not drag behind him his leprous bride, the church" (William Willimon, *What's Right With the Church*, p.3)**

**William Willimon, Chaplain at Duke, former parish pastor and now a Methodist Bishop in Alabama —**

> **"Jesus has many admirers who feel he married beneath his station. They love Christ but are unable to love those whom he loved…For most**

**of us the church is an embarrassment" (p. 3, 13).**

**Bill Gates, certified again as the richest man in the world and therefore granted instant status as a profoundly wise man as well—**

**"Just in terms of the allocation of time resources, religion is not very efficient. There's a lot more I could be doing on Sunday morning."**

**And on that same topic, Willimon tells about a church visitation team from his Methodist parish calling on a young woman who said that she did not like 'organized religion' and a team member replied, "Well, you'll be happy at Northside Church: we've been trying for thirty years but we ain't got it organized yet" (Ibid p.36).**

**The church, the actual church, not the abstract idea of the church but the actual church we say we believe in, made of real flesh and blood people, has always been something of an anomaly.**

**Jesus used the word “church” just three times, all three in the Gospel according to Matthew, one — the interchange with Peter the Rock — on which he says he will build his church. Critical New Testament scholarship — no longer in vogue today — has long been suspicious that someone, a proponent of Peter’s leadership in the early church, wrote that into the text — I’ve given up worrying about things like that — I no longer take a five minute homiletical detour to make sure my people know that there are real questions about the Pauline authorship of Ephesians, and I am sure that knowing there is not one Isaiah, but three, will not get any of them into heaven.**

**For what it’s worth, I think it is clear that Jesus meant to leave something behind. I have no trouble at all with the idea that he intended to build a church. I do not think he knew how it would all pan out — this amazing diversity and complexity so deeply embedded in human history: the papacy, the monasteries, the Reformation, the schools and hospitals, the Orthodox, the Presbyterians, the Pentecostals — literally exploding all over the world, particularly in Africa, South America, South East Asia, at precisely the moment in human history when the brightest and best thinkers concluded that religion itself was dying and**

**would soon be dead, vanquished at last by the enlightened forces of reason. I do not think Jesus knew about the magnificence of it, nor the tragedy and regular silliness. But he surely meant to leave followers — who would be united by nothing more than their conviction that he was God's man, and that what he taught and lived was the truth, a truth for which it was appropriate to live and die, a people united by the conviction that the truth he was did not die when he died, but continues to live in history in the hopeful and loving and courageous and generous things his people do in the world and which are signs of his Kingdom on earth.**

**I sometimes think that no one was more surprised by the existence of the church than the man credited with starting it, the Apostle Paul. Several years after the life and ministry of Jesus, he became a believer, a Christian, became convinced that Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish teacher and healer who was executed by the Romans, was, in fact, the Son of God, that God was fully in him and that after Jesus was crucified and died, he rose again and was powerfully present in the world and that in his life and death and resurrection, this Jesus was the living proof that there is a God and that God is love. Saul was so convinced that he had a**

**hold of the most important bit of information in the history of the world that he changed his name to Paul and spent the rest of his life traveling around the Roman Empire telling about it. Nothing, it seemed, could convince him to stop. He stirred up trouble wherever he went with his news, his good news. He was kicked out of town after town, arrested, beaten, insulted, humiliated, finally sent off to Rome in chains and executed. But he never stopped talking, telling people about Jesus. And wherever he went, wherever people heard about Jesus—places whose names we know because of him, places like Ephesus, Thessalonica, Galatia, Corinth—the people who heard the good news and believed it were baptized. Paul himself baptized them with water, and together they became a strange new phenomena, a community. Because they knew now that God was love and therefore the holiest, most righteous thing they could do was not perform a sacrifice or follow a list of rules but love one another, they became important to one another. Sometimes, when their communities turned against them and the ruling Romans began to consider them a nuisance and a threat to the common good, they were literally dependent on one another for their lives. And so they began to take care of one another. They cared for the widows and orphans and**

**the poor in their number. They shared what they had. Weekly they held a meeting, at first on the eve of the Jewish Sabbath, later on the first day of the new week, the very day Jesus was raised from the dead. They met secretly in someone's home. They shared a common meal. They called it a love feast. It was the precursor to the church potluck. They prayed together. One of them read scripture and said a few words of encouragement. At the end they passed around a loaf of bread and cup of wine and recalled how Jesus had told his followers to remember him when they broke bread and drank wine together. Someone said a blessing. Everyone hugged and kissed and then, after dark, they left, one by one, as inconspicuously as possible, and returned to their homes. They began to call themselves by his name—Christians. And the Greek word they used to describe who they were was *ekklesia,* which we translate "church."**

**When you visit the site of ancient Corinth, which was a busy port city in Greece, one of the places Paul visited and preached and where a church happened, you can see the cobbled sidewalks and streets, the chariot and wagon ruts in the ancient stones, the marketplace, the foundation of stalls where food and spices and wine and cloth were bought and sold. You**

**can see the foundation of the synagogue and the building next door where the church met after it wore out its welcome in the synagogue. And at the top of the marketplace, the Bema, the public platform, the podium where Roman officials appeared to address the population, the public pulpit, open to anyone who had an idea he wanted to share, a message he wanted to proclaim; the place where Paul, 2000 years ago, stood and first told the story of Jesus. The tour guide always invites the minister to go stand at the Bema, and so I did, and I will never forget, standing there under the hot Greek sun, imagining what happened there. I read, I think, that familiar and beautiful part of Paul's letter to those very people, the Corinthians, the thirteenth chapter: "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. . . . Love is patient; love is kind. . . . Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things!" Paul wrote those words to these people, people who lived there and walked and talked and loved and shopped and grew old and died there. It was quite a moment.**

**It was inspiring. But before he got to the love part, Paul, as a matter of fact, was a consummate realist about the church in Corinth, which was,**

**frankly, at the moment driving him crazy. Built on the idea that the love of God had been expressed in Jesus, organized around the principle that their job, mission, purpose was to show that love to their neighbors by the way they lived and treated one another, that little church had become an embarrassment. Those first Christians, who had heard Paul preach about love, started a fight, of all things. At first it was just a difference of opinion about something like what kind of prayers were said or hymns sung. They even fought over how much communion wine they should drink. And then it escalated, and people started dividing up into little groups, advocating their own positions in opposition to all the rest. There were liberals and conservatives, evangelicals and progressives. It was a real red state–blue state phenomena, and pretty soon they were saying nasty things about one another. "You're not a real Christian at all. You might think you are, but you're not. We are." And so those early Christians began what is perhaps our most enduring tradition: arguing and fighting with one another.**

**So Paul wrote a letter. It begins almost like a love letter: "To the church of God that is in Corinth. . . . I give thanks to my God always for you." And then he gets down to business.**

**I appeal to you that there be no divisions among you.**
**It has been reported to me that there are quarrels among you.**
**Some of you are saying "I belong to Paul," or "I'm with Peter"**
**and some are sure that they alone are on the side of Christ.**
**Is Christ divided?**

**I probably should have read that from the Bema instead of the passage about love.**

**Flash forward twenty centuries. We're still at it, and sometimes I think nobody is better at fighting and arguing than we Presbyterians.**

**In some ways, the Presbyterian Church is the most American of all the denominations. We were here first. We were the majority in Colonial America. We helped establish independence, and our Calvinist ideas helped shape the Constitution. In our long history, we have fought and argued about the same issues the nation itself was arguing about. When the nation divided over the issue of slavery, so did we.**

**When the nation discussed and argued about race, so did we. When the role of women in society became a topic of discussion and controversy in the nation, the church took it on as well. And now, for the past twenty years, we have been arguing, very publicly, about issues of human sexuality, sexual orientation to be precise. The argument continues. On the one hand, there are many Presbyterians who conclude that scripture and Christian tradition regard same-sex relationships as sinful and forbidden and would restrict ordination to ministry and to office in the church to people who are either faithfully married or chaste in singleness. On the other hand, there are many Presbyterians who conclude that scripture and tradition mandate a more open and less restrictive policy and that there are other issues that are far more important when it comes to choosing leaders. Jesus never mentioned the topic, after all, but he did have a lot to say about justice for the poor and not excluding people and including everyone—particularly those who are excluded elsewhere in society. Both sides are convinced absolutely that theirs is the one, true, Godly position on this issue. Both sides have created organizations with budgets and staffs and newsletters and annual meetings. I helped organize one of them, the Covenant Network of Presbyterians,**

**which advocates for a more open, inclusive Presbyterian church.**

**And so we have been arguing and voting on a variety of proposals to be less restrictive and more open, and every time we vote, we get angrier with one another until some are saying: Let's stop. Let's split the church, and each side can go its own way.**

**But now there is a unique opportunity. Several years ago the General Assembly created a task force to try to find a way to get us out of this mess without splitting the church. We called it the Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church, a phrase taken from the seventh ordination question ministers, elders, and deacons answer: "Do you promise to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church?" We assigned to the task force the widest possible diversity of people and opinions. In the best Presbyterian style, we made sure that the task force was balanced in every category of age, gender, geography, race, and ideological, theological, and biblical position. That is to say, we created a body almost guaranteed to fail and spend all its time arguing.**

**A minor miracle happened. The task force came up with a report and list of recommendations that it unanimously approved. It identifies the issues that divide us. It acknowledges that conflict is the context in which we live in this world and in the church. It suggests that what everybody in the church is really good at is blaming other people for all our troubles. "It's the liberals—no it's the conservatives." And it makes the simplest and most remarkable suggestion: that we stop shouting and start listening, that we actually try to understand where the other person is coming from. The report says that we shouldn't divide the church although there are lots of days, in the midst of the incessant arguing, that it sounds like a viable option. The report says we belong together because we are the church, the Body of Christ, and Christ, as Paul reminds us, is not divided.**

**On the most divisive issue, ordination, the report says that we ought to stop trying to change the rules, not easy for some of us to hear. And it proposes that we trust local congregations and local Presbyteries to decide how faithfully to apply the rules, not easy for others to hear.**

**It doesn’t resolve the issue. Neither side gets what it wants. But it is a way for this small part of the holy catholic church to stop fighting and to refocus its energies on being the church, loving and serving the world and showing the world something of what the love of God looks like.**

**I can’t think of anything more important than that. Christians and Jews, who ought to be the closest of brothers and sisters, are shouting at each other about Israel and Palestine. Evangelicals are fighting about who’s right and who’s wrong on a whole catalog of issues of doctrine and practice and morality. Presbyterians and Episcopalians and Methodists and Lutherans are arguing about sex. All the while the world is a divided place, a bloody, violent place where people die every day for reasons of political ideology and religious belief.**

**And almost invisible in the midst of that is the most important bit of good news the world has ever heard, namely that God is love, and the most important and promising and hopeful moral mandate, namely that God is properly worshiped, not when we are arguing and contending and winning battles of doctrine and practice and morality over our**

**opponents, when we defend the prerogatives of our particular religion to the death—ours or, preferably, the other person's—but when we love one another, when something of God's love in Jesus Christ becomes visible in our life together.**

**I want to begin in the morning with some reflections on the dilemma of mainline churches in our country and what is happening in our own Presbyterian family.**

**But yes, I believe we have a future and in a way it is the most interesting and exciting time to be a participant in the life of the church.**

**I believe we have a future. Elaine Pagels was right. "Here is a family that knows how to face death." And in the deep and broad ocean of human history there is no more profound issue than that.**

**Glen Fennema was my teacher. Glen had AIDS and died a few years ago. He and his family were members of a church that was clear that it did not approve nor accept his sexual orientation. Somehow they found us. His parents could not sever their relationship with their own church, even though it**

**rejected their son, so they alternated Sundays — attending with Glen who did join Fourth Church. After Glen's mother died, his father continued the every-other-Sunday routine, found himself sitting in the pew with a recently widowed woman — returned to the same pew in two weeks to find her there again. After several months of this covert but clearly intentional rendezvous in the pew, he reached over during the sermon and held her hand, half expecting to be slapped or at least rejected. She held on — "Best sermon you ever preached" he told me when I consulted with them about their wedding.**

**Glen loved the Presbyterian Church: he understood our position on his possible leadership. And in spite of that was in worship every Sunday and participated in the life of the congregation as long as he was able.**

**I keep a picture of him as a reminder of his commitment and of the lesson he taught me about the church. I like to remember Glen when I find myself thinking that maybe there isn't a future for us.**

**When he could no longer attend worship, Glen listened to the Sunday morning services on tape, then**

**CD. Near the end he was in a hospice facility. On one of my last visits we talked — with more depth than ever before about his life and about what was happening to him — his dying. I asked him "What's the hardest part of this?" He told me that the hardest part was nighttime, trying to fall asleep. He was so sick and at night when all the guests and family had gone home and the lights were down and the place was quiet, he felt alone with his pain and weakness and the knowledge that he was dying. "You know what I do?" he said. "I get out my CD player and put on my earphones and listen to the Sunday sermon. I must have a hundred of them. It settles me down. Sometimes I fall asleep right away during the prelude, or the anthem. Often I fall to sleep during your sermon — I'm not the only one to do that," he added. "Almost every night I go to sleep that way — here in bed but also in my church."**

**That's why I have never left — why I'm not leaving church.**

**It's why we have a future.**